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CASEY HELPING OR HURTING INTELLIGENCE EFFORT?

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WASHINGTON

✱ CIA Director William Casey may be trying to intimidate the news media with his anti-leak campaign, and he could be unwittingly providing intelligence information to the Soviets, legal and military experts say.

Casey has asked the Justice Department to consider prosecuting NBC News under an obscure 1950 national security law for a report naming a Naval intelligence project the network said was compromised by accused spy Ronald Pelton, on trial in Baltimore.

NBC News and the correspondent who reported the story declined to comment Tuesday, except to say the network's lawyers were meeting in New York.

✱ Retired Adm. Gene LaRocque, director of the Center for Defense Information, a military policy "think tank," said Casey, by pressing the NBC report, may have given the Soviets unintended intelligence information.

"If this man Pelton did provide information to the Soviets as alleged, the Soviets now know through Mr. Casey's action that that information was highly sensitive, important and prejudicial to U.S. interests," he said. "Up to now the Soviets could only hope that they had received accurate information."

Jane Kirtley, executive director of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, said Casey may be succeeding in intimidating the news media even before taking formal legal steps.

She said she hoped this would not be chosen as the test case for the 1950 law.

"The beauty of this, until that happens (is): You really don't have anything that can be contested, but yet you've managed to at least give some news organizations some serious pause about what they should be publishing," she said. "If you can intimidate the media, that's almost the next best thing."

A network spokeswoman said it was NBC's understanding that the secret intelligence project "Ivy Bells" had been reported before, and U.S. intelligence experts said the NBC report did not appear to contain any revelations.

Attorney General Edwin Meese said the Justice Department would investigate, and most media organizations indicated they would wait for any action on prosecution before deciding to make any changes in newsgathering policy.

CBS News executive John Huddy said, "I would certainly not want to publish or air anything that would cause the loss of life in a covert operation or a catastrophic setback in American intelligence."

"At the same time, history has been such that you never know when you're being victimized, that maybe this is the first step in a move by this or any other administration to shut down the press."

The NBC report, by James Polk, discussed the activities of Pelton, a former National Security Agency employee accused of giving Soviet agents information about U.S. interception of Soviet communications.

Polk reported: "Pelton apparently gave away one of the NSA's most sensitive secrets, a project with the code name 'Ivy Bells' believed to be a top-secret eavesdropping program by American submarines inside Soviet harbors."

"'Ivy Bells,'" according to a defense analyst who asked to remain anonymous, is part of a \$1 billion Naval deception, submarine reconnaissance, electronic warfare and intelligence operation.